

## The Living Arts

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### *For the Waifs of 50's Art, the Last Laugh*

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Special to The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 26 — Strolling down a newly restored section of Market Street, people are stopping in their tracks to stare with awe into the windows of a new art gallery and mumble: "They're back. They're back!"

And indeed they are. Just when most people were either deeply saddened or pleasantly reassured that they would never again see these pictures of haunted, saucer-eyed waifs in what are known as Keane paintings, they are back in the city where they were popularized more than 30 years ago. The force responsible for this virtual renaissance of maudlin popular art is Margaret Keane, who, at the age of 64, has returned to San Francisco after 25 years to bring "Keanes" to a new generation. She says she is claiming her rightful place as the true artist of the older paintings that have been attributed to her former husband, Walter Keane.

Her Keane Eyes Gallery has been open nearly three months, and business appears to be brisk despite the recession in the rest of the art world. A wide range of waif-theme items, including posters, decorative plates, note cards and figurines are available for under \$200, while limited-edition prints begin at \$2,000 and original oils at \$15,000. A giant painting of a cable car spilling out children, animals and balloons has been marked "sold." Its price was \$185,000.

Critics loved to lampoon the Keane paintings as the public showered them with praise, making Ms. Keane a sort of Wayne Newton of the art world. At one time, the



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Margaret Keane painted this before a jury to prove that she was the real artist.

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# For the Waifs Born of 1950's Art, the Last Laugh

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works hung on walls from the United Nations in New York to the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow; some were in the personal art collections of Chiang Kai-shek and Red Skelton.

But for other people, the "emotion-wrenching blobs of little humanity" as they were described in an early

publicity brochure are an example of the saying, "There's no accounting for taste."

"People either hate my paintings or love them," Ms. Keane said. "There does not seem to be much middle ground." She concedes that married couples often argue right in the gallery because "one person desperately wants one and other says, 'I won't have it in my house!'"



Margaret Keane, with one of her paintings in the background, at home

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

On a recent visit to the gallery, a young New York couple had no disagreement. They bought a \$2,000 print, "Sunday Best," depicting a small child in a frilly white dress, sitting in a chair. The work bears a striking similarity to a 1962 Keane, "Waiting for Grandmother," a tribute to how many times the same format can be updated and recycled.

"It's just precious," the young woman said. She added that she regretted not being able to afford an original (\$15,000).

Despite the fact that paintings of sad-eyed children are thought of only as part of late 1950's popular culture, Ms. Keane has been selling her work in Hawaii for 25 years, "almost before the paint could dry," through a large, chain-store-like gallery.

"She was very successful in Hawaii, but it was very isolated," said Robert Brown, her business manager and salesman at the gallery. "People thought they were done by her former husband or thought she was dead."

## Puppies to Match

Today, Ms. Keane lives with her 42-year-old daughter, Jane, in their newly purchased house in Sebastopol, a small rural town 75 miles north of San Francisco in Sonoma County. The living room is dominated by an enormous round coffee table onto which Ms. Keane has pasted hundreds of faces of waifs. The ragamuffins, taken from the paintings of the early '60's, have giant dark eyes that sometimes shed a single giant tear. Frequently, the waifs hold a kitten or a puppy with matching eyes.

"In the beginning, I didn't know why I did them," Ms. Keane said. "They all have these large eyes. I was painting my own inner feelings. I was very sad and very confused about why there was so much sadness in the world and why God permitted wickedness."

She met and married Walter Keane in the bohemian atmosphere of the North Beach section of San Francisco. She said she began turning out paintings, adding that her husband quickly and secretly promoted them as his own. The waifs caught on so rapidly that after the Keanes put up cheap posters with a painting reproduced on them to advertise the small gallery they had opened, the posters themselves were ripped down and hung in San Francisco apartments.

Ms. Keane now says she wished she had not deferred to her husband's wish to be known as the artist. "The whole thing just snowballed and then it was too late to say it wasn't him who painted them," she said. "I'll

always regret that I wasn't strong enough to stand up for my rights."

Walter Keane's version of the facts differs. Now 76 and living in La Jolla, Mr. Keane says he originated the style.

"The birth of the sad-eyed waifs was in Berlin in 1947 when I met these kids," he said. "Margaret asked for my help to learn to paint, and I suggested that she project a picture she liked on a canvas and fill it in like children do a numbered painting. Then the woman started copying my paintings."

## Mr. Keane's Theory

Mr. Keane, who said he had just completed writing a "wild, exciting, heartbreaking, sexy autobiography," expounded at length on a theory he has formulated about his ex-wife's "theft" of his art. This theory variously involves an "international art-fraud syndicate," informants from the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Hotel Crillon in Paris.

While he has sought redress in the courts twice, Margaret Keane has thus far emerged the winner. A lawsuit against her for copyright infringement was dismissed; she then sued Mr. Keane for libel for statements he made in an interview with USA Today, and to back her suit, she executed a waif painting in front of the jury in less than one hour. She won a \$4 million judgment. Walter Keane declined to participate in the paint-off, citing a sore shoulder.

On appeal, the verdict was upheld, but the judgment was overturned as excessive. Margaret Keane said she planned no further legal action, that her point had been made and she did not care about the money. Walter Keane dismisses it all as "a stunt."

"She could copy any artist by now," Mr. Keane said. "She could copy Rembrandt."

Ms. Keane's current paintings are full of bright colors and huge-eyed but happy children, often on gold background's in intentionally rich clothes alongside peacocks and other exotic animals. She said these works reflected her own happiness after she became a Jehovah's Witness. That, she said, followed years in which she looked into astrology, palmistry, handwriting analysis and transcendental meditation.

"These are paintings of children in paradise," she said. "They are what I think the earth is going to look like some day when God's will is done."

As for the continuing criticism of her work, she said it no longer bothers her. "I'm like Liberace," she said. "I just laugh all the way to the bank."